Interview with Jim Lowe, afc2016037_04042
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Interviewed at Lowe Funeral Home and Crematory in Burlington, North Carolina, by Sarah Bryan for Folklife of the Funeral Services Profession

Sarah Bryan: Let me ask you, please, to introduce yourself for the recording.

Jim Lowe: Jim Lowe[1], president and owner of Lowe Funeral Home and Crematory in Burlington, North Carolina.

SB: Great. Well, let me ask you to tell me a bit about the history of Lowe Funeral Home, please.

JL: Okay. In 1917, 99 years ago, my grandfather and two other gentlemen started Cates, Lowe and Cheek, which was a funeral home-furniture store combination in downtown Burlington. And around 1930, during the Depression, Cates and Cheek dissolved the furniture business, and my grandfather moved the funeral home to an old house down on Main Street in Burlington. Operated there 'til 1955, and in '55 we moved two miles outside the Burlington city limits. People said people would never come this far to do business with us, we were too far away. Well, now we're downtown Burlington. Basically we really are downtown Burlington. Been here since '55. My grandfather died in '61. Dad took over, and he died in '92. I went to Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science, got out in '68, and as I say, Dad died in '92, and I've been here ever since. Sixty-nine years old, I call myself semi-retired, but if I'm not fishing or traveling I'm here every day. I love it. Would not do— Nobody could have planned their future and carried it out any better than mine has been. Loved every minute of it. Taking night calls all these years. Well, I took night calls until I was, oh, 45 years old, I guess. I did quit taking night calls after that, but—. It's been an interesting life. People, the funeral business, people say, "Oh, that's terrible, boring." But it's not, it's exciting. You're seeing people at their worst sometimes, and trying to make their worst situation a better situation.

SB: What are the qualities that you think make a good funeral director?

JL: Whew. You've got to care about people. I have, we handpick our staff. My number-one man has been here right at 30 years. His uncle worked for us 41 years; actually worked for us on a Tuesday before he died on Thursday. His father worked for us probably 16 years part-time. His son graduated from college and was having trouble finding what he thought he wanted to do, and his dad asked me one night, he said,

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[1] Mr. Lowe's last name rhymes with "now" rather than "know."

"Eric was asking me if I thought he'd make a funeral director." And I said, "Yes, and he can come to work tomorrow if he wants to." And he's been here—I mean, I've watched him grow up. You know, I knew his parentage, whatever. We had another man that, he was an accountant for a business here, and my wife worked with him for two or three years, and Eric went to church with them. And they both would come to me and say, "Look, we know a guy that's a funeral director. He thinks he's an accountant, but he's a funeral director." And I took him to lunch one day, made him in an offer, and he's been here 22 years. But just about everybody we have gone to and said, "We want you to work for us." Tried a few guys that walked in off the street, but generally they don't work out as good.

[0:05:00] One guy that I went to church with, and I made him an offer, and he's been here about 10, 12 years now. Still leads the choir at church, but he's a great funeral director. We've got a female that's, I believe she worked for us eight or 10 years, she got married and had a child and her husband wanted her to quit and look after the boy. So she took about a six-, eight-year leave of absence, and called me one day—she said all along she wanted to come back some day—she called me and she said, "I'm ready to come back if you'll let me. When would you be interested in my coming back?" I said, "Well, if I come in tomorrow and you're on the clock, I'll consider you back. If it's a month from now when I come in and you're on the clock, I'll consider you back. Anytime. And she's been back probably another eight years now. And a very good funeral director. Very caring. People love her. And I've always said there was a place in the funeral business for women. And in general they would be more sympathetic, more caring, than the average man, I would think, just by their nature. And now my daughter graduated from Elon University in 2012, worked in banking for three years, and almost two years ago she said—in fact, we were on our way to a Carolina Panther football game—and she said, "I'm thinking about quitting my job and going to school and getting my funeral director's license." And all through high school and college when she worked here, "I could never embalm a body. I could never touch a body. I don't want to be in the funeral business." And all of a sudden she changed her mind. She had done her college internship for Kleinfeld's in New York City, the world's largest wedding dress supply—the *Say Yes to the Dress* TV program and all that. And we get to see her on TV sometimes. But she said, "If I'm going back to school, though, I'm going to go where I want to go." So we kept her up—it costs a lot of money to keep a girl up in New York City—so she could go to school up there. And she passed her national boards, and she's been back since September. So that's four generations, and next year, 2017, we can say a full 100 years. The other two predominantly white funeral homes here in the county, both of them in the last six months have sold out to chains. So we are the only family-owned cemetery. And I'm proud to say family-owned for, next year, 100 years, four generations. And I think the government statistics say that any family-owned business is less than five percent successful, at four generations. So I'm pretty confident that we're going to get to be in the five percent.

SB: Congratulations on the anniversary coming up!

JL: Me too. Me too. I'm very excited about it. We're going to do some advertising about it, whatever.

[Talking about mic position.]

SB: You mentioned that your grandfather, I believe, had originally been in the furniture business.

JL: The furniture— You know, all the old-line funeral homes, every funeral, every predominantly white funeral home in Burlington, started out as a furniture store – funeral home combination. I actually have a coffin, a (?) coffin, a spool bed, and a spool dresser made by [John Freeland Sutton?], who was the coffin and cabinet builder in Northern Alamance County. Died in 1923, but he built, in those days, whoever built the furniture for people built the coffins. And as the coffin and furniture maker moved into town, built a shop, he ends up buying a horse-drawn hearse, doing it all.

[00:10:07] Built Mama's dining room table, built Grandpa's coffin. But most of the old funeral homes started out that way.

SB: Am I right in thinking that they were often, into the '20s, that the funeral home and furniture companies would also be phonograph dealers, often?

JL: Phonograph? Possibly. It would probably go with the furniture inside of it. Our first Cates, Lowe, and Cheek building was in downtown Burlington, right in the middle of the heart of downtown Burlington, and it was a two-story building, and the funeral home was upstairs and the furniture store was downstairs. And of course, my grandfather broke off when they shut down the furniture business, and had a separate—it was an old two-story house. They lived upstairs. When we built this building, in '61, my grandparents lived upstairs. And Daddy built a house behind the funeral home, next lot, back there. And when my grandfather died in '61, I moved out of Mother and Dad's house and moved upstairs with my grandmother. But in those days, the textile mills here were running three shifts, people would get off at 11 o'clock at night, and if they'd hear that somebody died, they'd come by here and ring the doorbell at midnight. Had a big trucking company here, drivers would come in the middle of the night, find out somebody they knew died, two o'clock in the morning they'd ring the doorbell. I'd come down and open the door, cut a few lights on, let them sign the book, see the body, lock up, and go back to bed. We had an ambulance service 'til around—hmm—'66, I think, we went out of the ambulance business. A private individual bought an ambulance service. I started riding the ambulance when I was 16, and taking night calls.

SB: What was that like? What were some of your experiences with the ambulance service?

JL: Ambulance? Oh, gosh. Ah (laughs), delivered my first baby at 16 years old, but it was the eleventh child of this black lady, and it was not much to it—I mean, it was like, she did it all (laughs) in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. But we used to carry women to the hospital to have babies, carry them home in those days, in the ambulance. They had to stay on their back for several days after having a child. That was a different time. Wrecks, good gracious. Car wrecks. I loved it, but in those days we were probably doing—maybe it got up to 100 funerals a year. And it was, we could manage it all. Now, at well over 300 funerals a year, there's no way we could— And plus, in our ambulance, we had splints (laughs), and we had a fishing tackle box with band-aids and bandages and whatever, and that was what—we had an oxygen tank—everything else, now look at what—the EMTs, everything, are highly trained, ambulances fully equipped. They can do just about anything in an EMT vehicle now. All we would do was pick them up and get them to the hospital as quick as we could. And now they save lives before they ever pick up the body. There's no way we could keep up with the funeral business and that today. But it was a lot of fun for a kid. Flying down the road, running stoplights, and whatever. Sliding up to a wreck, or delivering a baby. Mm-hmm!

SB: What are some of your earliest memories of the funeral home?

JL: The funeral home. That's an interesting— One of my favorite stories. During Vietnam—and that's when military, first the Vietnam, bodies would come in at the railroad depot, and we'd go down and pick them up at the railroad station. And a boy was killed in Vietnam. The night of the visitation there was a nephew of the boy who was killed. They called him Little Elvis, and he was a brat. He ran all over the funeral home.

[00:15:00] He opened doors he shouldn't have been opening, bumping into people, he ran up and down the halls. Just couldn't keep him calmed down, and his parents weren't making any attempt to either. Well, when we had the funeral the next day, the military was there to fire the volleys at the graveside service. Well, under the tent, the soldier's grandmother was sitting on the back row of the tent, and when the military fired the first volley, Grandma throws her arms up in the air and hollers out, flips over backwards in her chair, and Little Elvis screams out, "My god, they shot Grandma." (Laughs) I mean, every family member, the preacher, everybody was just (makes noise of stifled laughter) having a fit. It wasn't, "GOLLY, they shot Grandma!" It was, (in tone of mild surprise) "My god, they shot Grandma." And this little kid—it was like— But that was a lot of fun. And did not experience it, because it was before my time, but back when we were carrying bodies home, my dad and our only other full-time man at that time had carried the body—they had gone to the house to set up the lamps and the

equipment and whatever. My grandfather comes with the body, and he's helping them set up. And it was an old house that just had one lightbulb hanging down in the middle of the old farmhouse. And we had some sort of an attachment, that we unscrewed the lightbulb, put this attachment in the socket, and we could run our drop cords to run our lamps at the end of the casket. And my grandfather was tall for born in 1883, he was six-foot-one. Every picture I've seen of him, he was taller than anybody else in the picture. But he was tremendously fat. I mean, skinny arms, legs, but a huge stomach. He always wore suspenders to hold his pants up. And for some reason he had forgotten his suspenders that day. Well, he reaches over his head for the light socket, his belly slims down and stretches, his pants go to his ankles. They said when he bent over to pick them up—he wore one-piece underwear with a slit in the back—and when he bent over to pick up his pants, the slit opens up, and he hears two little girls giggling behind him. They said he pulled his pants up, got in the hearse, drove back to town. Was too embarrassed, he didn't even come out on the funeral. He was too embarrassed to come out on the funeral. Well, probably 15, 18, 20 years ago, a lady had died, I was making arrangements with the family, and her sister, the dead lady's sister, was part of the family making arrangements. Right in the middle of everything she says, "I just want you to know, I saw your granddaddy's heiney." And I'm saying, "Okay, time out. It's time to hear this story." Well, she and the dead lady were the two little sisters, staying there watching my grandfather when his pants fell down. And I'm thinking, I've heard this story all my life about my grandfather, assumed it was true but no evidence; now I have proof that it was a true story! (Laughing) I still love it. But I wear suspenders and so I don't have to worry about forgetting them, I put them on every suit when I get the suit, and they stay on it until they go to the dry cleaners, and I put them back on when they get back. We won't have that problem again. Whew.

SB: What were your grandfather and your father like, as people?

JL: My grandfather, when he started out— He actually went to Elon University, Elon College in those days. I have his receipts for tuition for 1906 and 1907. He paid $11.60 for two years. He earned his money to pay his tuition; he was a big bird hunter, and he guided—Yankees would come down from up north to the train station at Elon, he would pick them up in a horse and buggy, take them out to a hunting lodge, and he would take them bird hunting, quail hunting.

[00:20:00] Every quail they shot, they paid him ten cents. And that's how he paid his tuition. 1906, 1907. He carried the mail; I have pictures of him in his horse-drawn mail buggy. And I actually met a lady years ago that, on his mail route, he had contracted with a farm family out there to board a horse of his and to have him lunch every day. He would stop mid-way of his route, have lunch with them, trade horses, finish his mail route. Next day he'd come back, trade horses again, have lunch. And I met a lady who, she said, "I was a little girl, and I remember your grandfather coming in his mail buggy, and changing horses." But he ended up, he was—I forgot what— He was Sunday

school superintendent at Front Street Methodist Church, and they sent him to West Burlington to found a mission. And it was called the Mission Bible Class. Well, when the Methodists got liberal, as liberal was more liberal, beyond what he liked, he broke off and started his own church, which turned out to be J. A. Lowe Memorial Mission Church. Since then, after his death, they joined the Baptist Association as J. A. Lowe—or Lowe Memorial Baptist Church now. He was a funeral director, he was a minister. I still see families that tell me, "When we lost a baby, he buried our baby for us, and we never got a bill." And we still do that. He was— I was 13 when he died, but by living next door, I spent as much time with him—and I was over at the funeral home every minute I could be. I remember when they were coming in with a body, I would position myself, and when they opened the door to the embalming room I could peep in, see what's going on. When I was 10 years old, eight years old. Knowing that's what I was going to do when I grew up. When I moved upstairs I was 13, after my grandfather died, and by the time I was 15 I was helping embalm. Our embalmer was Ollie T. Hudson, from Hudson Funeral Home in Durham. And he drove up and did our embalming in those days. And I was the first full-time embalmer that we had. And that was '68. When I was 15 and 16, I was helping embalm bodies, and by the time I was 16 and 17, by the time Mr. Hudson got here from Durham, I'd have the body embalmed or mostly embalmed. He'd come in, look at it, verify that everything looked good and I had done a good job—or helped me finish up—pick up his check, sign the death certificate, go back to Durham.

SB: What was it about the work that drew you to it? Why were you interested as a child?

JL: Whew. Well, the ambulance service was exciting. I guess 'cause my father and grandfather were in it. And I know they both loved it. I've always enjoyed helping people. It was honorable work. Somewhere, probably 30 years ago, the federal government did a, some sort of—I think it was the federal government—anyway, they did a study, somebody did a study, on honorable professions, most respected. And lo and behold, funeral directors were way above lawyers, above doctors. Funeral director was like second on the list, which was pretty strange. I mean, I don't think today, with the chain funeral homes, being owned by stock companies, you don't have the same feeling. You don't have the same feeling. I know a good friend of mine who I would have considered one of the best funeral directors in North Carolina, their funeral home sold out.

[00:25:00] He had been with the company for years. And they took him off of seeing families for a certain length of time, because his sales average was not what they expected, or what they set their goals at. And in this business, every family that comes to the door, you find a way to give them what they want. Sometimes you do it for next to nothing, or you take what you can get, but you serve that family the best you could. Even in, I think it was '83, FTC came in, and you had to give families an itemization,

FTC forms, saying how much a funeral was and all that, before they left, after they'd made arrangements. My dad just had a fit. He said, "I'm not going to talk about money. I mean, Mama just died. We're not going to sit here and tell them how much they've got to pay us." Until two guys walked in one day with badges and wanted to see our FTC forms. Scared my dad to death. I had the forms made up, an original, and had them hid because I knew we was going to have to do it. The two guys that came in scared my dad so bad, by the next day I had them to the printer, and we've been using them ever since. But it's still hard for me. I mean, I'm old-school, and it's hard for me too. And I tell every family before I show them the papers, "It's FTC, Federal Trade Commission, requires it. You know today what you spent, not find out next week when you can't do anything about it." But just hand them a form with prices on it, ask them to sign it, ask them for a check, it's just not—it's not in me. My guys fuss at me all the time. And the way things are today, we can't always tell them all the figures, because it may be 24 hours before we find out what the newspaper charges for obituaries or whatever. But we still give them a form, and put little stars where there may be an additional charge that we can't tell them at the time. It's still hard for me to do. I'm not comfortable doing it. I mean, we have to have money to operate, but it's not my primary aim. It's to serve that family. But I'm 69 years old. I'm old-school. Our other, younger guys don't have any problem with it. And I know, the change now, they ask for the check. When I opened the funeral home in Charlotte, I had to be up there one day, and a lady calls, and I happened to pick up the phone, which is rare, and she said, "Do y'all make the family give you a check for $5,000 before you move the body?" I said, (laughs) "No, ma'am, I've never heard of such a thing." She said, "Well, Such-and-Such a funeral home is here now to pick up Mother at the house, and they said they can't move the body until they get a check for $5,000." And she said, "I'm going to send them on their way if you'll come get Mama." (Laughs) And we did! It just—the funeral business is not just dollars and cents. It has to play a part in it, but that's not the main reason we're here. We have to pay our bills, but still. When my grandfather died, he left the building to my grandmother, so we paid her rent. And even when she went in the rest home and they'd raise the rest home rates, we'd just raise her rent rates, you know, to take care of it. But he left all the cash to my grandmother, what little there was, and Daddy had all the bills and the business, but no money to pay it with. And he actually spent about three months down at Chapel Hill in the psychiatric ward. He had a nervous breakdown. That was tough. [Emotional]

[00:29:55] But, gosh; I was 16, 17, 18 years old at the time, and I remember at the psych ward, they did classes and beat out copper ashtrays (laughs) and stuff like this down there, but I was going to Chapel Hill to pick up a body one time, and saw my dad walking along the sidewalk. You know, he had some free time. They only time I saw him, three months he was in the psych ward down there. So. Pulled up beside of him, find a parking place, talk to him for a little while. But he survived. And it grew. I mean, we're doing about 350 funerals a year now. I remember when my grandfather was living, if we did 50 or 60, we were happy.

SB: How do you deal with the emotional pressures of your work?

JL: Whew.

SB: How do you prepare yourself for, you know—

JL: You just do it. You know. You don't always know what it's going to be like. Yesterday I had a family in, and I had my daughter sit in, because she's learning, and I just want to have her sit in with different funeral directors and see how they explain things or whatever. And (laughs) it was a trying experience for both of us. They were here four hours making arrangements, selecting the casket, because three children and spouses, and sometimes almost all of them were talking at the same time, trying to get the vital information for the legal papers, couldn't decide what day to have it, what time to have it, whatever. After it was over with, I said, "What did you think, JimmiAnne?" She said, "I would have given up two hours ago!" (Laughs) But you just don't know what you're going to run into next. And I have one experience, the only—I'm sure everybody that I've dealt with over the years, every family, is not ecstatic about what we did. I'm sure. They can't be. Had one family that literally, I didn't go in the funeral, upset them a lot, everything that I told them, I felt like I had to tell them, I figured it was very important; and the situation was odd. The man and his wife lived in South Florida. She goes to work that morning, and then he's in shorts and tennis shoes, no pants, no shirt. He's going to mow the yard. She comes home, 5:30, 6:00 that night. He's been laying in the yard—in the summertime, Florida sun—all day long. That was on a Friday. The medical examiner's office in Dade County did not see the body 'til Monday. He had skin-slip, he was blown up, been in a cooler since late Friday night. The director told me, who was picking up and shipping him to me, "He's really in bad shape. His skin slipped. You're going to have"—he'd embalmed him, did the best he good, but he said, "he's not going to be very presentable." And the wife and her mother, who lived here, came in to make arrangements, and the wife said, "I can't imagine what he's going to look like. I'm scared that he's not going to look good." And the mother kept saying, "When they get through with him, he's going to look just like he did when you walked out the door Friday morning." And I knew the next day they were going to come in and see him, and he wasn't going to look like that. And I went through the whole scenario of when he died, the situation, how long he was in the ME's office. When we got the body, it was a week after he died before we got the body back here. And I said, "There's just no way, with all the talent we can use on him, to make him look like he did Friday morning when you went to work." And I think the mother, the mother-in-law, was—the wife would have been okay with that, but the mother-in-law kept saying, "You shouldn't have told her that." Well, I knew the next day I didn't want her to be in shock when she came in. And if I had to do it again today I'd do the exact same thing. And I still see it that way. But they were, the mother-in-law upset the wife, they both ended up being, said I shouldn't have told her all that.

[00:35:05] I didn't go to the funeral, I didn't work the visitation, I just stayed in the background. And I still have nightmares about it. I still wake up thinking about it. That family. I want every family to be happy with what we do. We hear that a lot. Our business has grown. We've grown from the smallest funeral home in Burlington to, we're up there with what all along has been the biggest, highest-volume funeral home now. And you don't grow like that— I mean the highest-volume funeral home was doing the same number of funerals 30 years ago. Thirty years ago, we've over doubled. You don't do that by not giving good service and satisfying families. And we could have been even bigger, but back in the old days, funeral homes sold burial insurance, and our competitors had actual salesmen that went out and knocked on doors selling burial insurance. And my dad wouldn't do it. He said, "I just don't think that's ethical. I don't want to do it." And those people that bought those thousand-dollar policies in the '30s and '40s and '50s feel like they were kind of tied to that funeral home, even though they could have used it anywhere. Insurance is insurance. But that's one reason that we grew slower, I think, because we didn't have somebody out there knocking on doors pushing insurance and that funeral home. But we caught up.

SB: Did your father and grandfather ever talk about what the work was like during the Depression?

JL: Well, Dad was not—Daddy was born in '21, the Depression was, what, around '30? So he wasn't very well involved, very well involved in it whatsoever. Though I'm sure he was hanging around the funeral home a lot. But I know it was tough because in '61 when my grandfather died, he didn't have much; I mean, I'll tell anybody, he gave away as much as he kept. But that was his heart. [Emotional] Between the, ah, funeral business and the church, and the members, and whatever, it was a service to the community. I remember him talking about the most embarrassed he ever was—well, second-most, maybe, after the other story—he said they buried a lady out in the country, and said he, after the graveside service he went under the tent to bring the family out, carry them back in the church to wait until the grave was closed. He looked around, and the husband wasn't there. He looked, and he was counting out money on top of his wife's casket. (Laughs) My grandfather went over there and said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Well, J. A., I hired you to bury my wife. You buried my wife, I'm going to pay you." He said, "No, no, we'll take care of this later. Don't worry about it." "Nope. Nope. You've done what I asked you to do, I'm going to pay you." He said it was real embarrassing. A lot of people would have grabbed the money, stuck it in their pocket, you know! I guess I've gotten some of that. I mean, I joined—gosh—over 25 years ago, a good funeral director from Goldsboro called me and wanted me to join a study group. Twelve independent funeral homes, none of us are involved with a chain, to meet once a year to discuss what we're doing that's good, what's worked, what we've tried and didn't work, even helping each other, going together buying cars and chemicals, whatever. Very interesting, but I'm the only surviving member of the

original 12 funeral directors. But this one funeral director was telling me—and he was doing about the same number of funerals we were doing—he said, "Each Christmas my partner and I write ourselves a check for $150,000 as a Christmas bonus." Two of them and one of me (laughs), and I'm thinking, "I haven't even close to $150,000, bonuses, salary, and everything else. What am I doing wrong?" (Laughs) They're doing the same number of calls we are and they're making that kind of money. Well, our staff is—we've got probably 12 full-time on the payroll, all but one's licensed, and we have one unlicensed full-time employee. The cost of hiring licensed people—the old, in the old days, the funeral director was licensed and he'd have part-time people, a couple unlicensed people. He was the only licensed person there. But today, to me, if you're going to do things right and professional and whatever, you've got to have trained people to do it. And we may send one part-time man out with four or five, or three or four, licensed people, an everything will be fine. But I don't think you can put two or three part-time guys on a funeral with one licensed person, and it's not the same. They're not getting the same quality of service as with trained people. And we're not perfect. But I'll put our staff up against any funeral home in North Carolina. Honestly. Good, caring people that care about the families they serve, and it makes a difference.

SB: Can I ask about the role of faith and beliefs, spiritual belief, in your work?

JL: Well, there is a God, and if you don't believe in Him, where are you? My dad, although I was never crazy about the Methodist church—remember I was raised in it, Daddy sang in the choir, and it's the same church that my grandfather started out— I have the watch, I think it's 1906, maybe. It was mis-engraved. They gave it to my grandfather when they sent him to West Burlington. It says, "From Street Methodist Church," instead of "From Front Street." But I've got the watch they gave him when he, when they sent him to West Burlington to found a mission. But I used to go with him. He did a radio program, and he taped it on Thursday mornings and they played it on Sunday mornings. And I used to go with him. I couldn't talk, I'd go in there when "On the Air" came on, I had to— And I'd sit there and watch him preaching, and how you spoke into a microphone with no congregation there to listen to you— But he did it for years. I guess he did it pretty good, because I hear people talk about hearing him on the radio every Sunday. But I've been active in the same church for over 30 years, and been on the board of directors for years. My favorite minister died playing racquetball at the Y, and he did not have a cemetery lot, and I had just bought an eight-grave lot at Pine Hill Cemetery because I knew when my mother died it would fill up the old eight-grave lot with no place for anybody else. Cemetery was filling up, so I bought an eight-grave lot. Well, I gave my minister and his wife, who's still living, two of my grave spaces to be buried on. (?) Taught me how to play tennis. We played basketball together. Played dirty. We guarded each other, and I'd push and go up his back for a rebound.

[00:45:00] Once in a while I'd catch myself rolling across the court where he'd taken two hands and knocked me out of the way. We used to go to the ACC Tournament

together. We were close friends. And you're dealing with a lot of different ministers and a lot of different faiths. I have a little trouble with some of them. We are now probably burying 10 or 12 Muslims a year. Ah, which—my grandfather would, he'd have a fit. I remember, I guess it was late '50s, we had a funeral for a Chinese guy, and my grandmother and grandfather never could say he was Chinese. "That Chinaman." We couldn't pronounce his name, so he said, "That Chinaman's funeral is so-and-so." It was all traditional, Protestant work. Now we do some Buddhist, do maybe 10 or 12 Muslims a year, so we've had to— Of course, I learned their traditions in school, but still, it's real different.

SB: What is that like for you? What kind of adjustment do you have to consider?

JL: (Sighs) Well, you play it by ear. When you get a call, Muslims don't do anything like we're used to doing. The first one we buried died in—somewhere in Pennsylvania—and his son, who was a doctor here, called and said, "My father died this morning. The funeral home is shipping him to you. He's got to be buried by sundown today." He said, "The Pakistani Islamic Association bought 26 acres, but it's still in woods. We were going to build a mosque there and a cemetery, but it's still wooded." He said, "I'm flying in, be there at 10 o'clock, and we will decide where we're going to bury my father on that land." I went out with a chain saw and jeans and a flannel shirt, and a gravedigger with a Bobcat, and we cut a trail down through the woods, cleared a little area for them to have their prayers, another little area further down in the woods, opened it up, dug a grave, he sat there with his compass to make sure that the grave was exactly north and south. The body's buried unembalmed, wrapped in a sheet, and we dig what funeral directors used to call a full-vault, a vault grave. You dig down four feet, set in six inches all the way around, and dig down two feet, and then put the body in that lower chamber. Lay it on his side facing east, facing Mecca. And then we furnish some oak boards that we lay across that ledge in there, and then we put all the dirt back on the grave, piled up three or four feet tall because it's not tamped or anything. And that's the way we leave the grave. After we'd buried two or three I told the Pakistani Islamic Association, I said, "We need to organize this cemetery." They were just saying, "Dig one here. Dig one here." So we marked off 60 graves for them. And I said, "They really need to be marked in some fashion, and you need to keep some records on it." So when one dies now, we include a grave marker, a small grave marker, in our charges, and we have the tombstone guy cut that and place that. We've marked off 60 graves, filled them, marked off 60 more, filled them up, and we've marked off another 60 now. And we're well into that 60, all dug in rows. And they're buried as they die, it's not like the Smith section and the Ali section or the (?) section, or the whatever section. Just as they die. So husband and wife are normally not close to each other if they die. And they lose a lot of babies. We've buried a lot of babies. I think because they probably don't have the prenatal care. They try to do everything themselves.

[00:50:02 – 00:57:20] Discussion of cultural conflicts involved in serving people of different faiths.

JL: It's an exciting business. You don't know what you're going to run into. Every family's different. In the last few years, and I think it's because families are so separated—I mean, family in Chicago, California, kids see their grandparents Christmastime maybe, or maybe not even then. You know, and people coming in, and we're holding bodies now for a week or 10 days, for the convenience of the family. Because, well, grandson's on vacation, he won't be able to be here, it'll be four days before he's able to get back, whenever. So they're holding it. And I remember when we had a death, especially out in the country, the whole community shut down. The men would go out and dig the graves. The women would go to the house and clean and fix food. Everybody, who communities got together for that funeral. And you see some of it now, but nothing like you used to. When we first started having a few cremations—and we have the crematory—but it was almost like so many people, I think they honestly felt like, "Well, if the funeral home picks up the body and cremates it, we can go back to work tomorrow and everything will be fine." They did not realize that there is a healing period, and you need the support of family and friends, and you need to hear the story. You need to hear Dad's buddy talking about, "I was with your daddy when he got his first speeding ticket. You wouldn't believe it." All those healing stuff that you need to hear. And we have trouble with a lot of families now, trying to explain that there's value in what we do, to be able to get the support of family and friends, hear the stories. You're missing a lot. There's a healing process, and that adds to the healing. It's real sad sometimes. We've started having some receptions with food, whatever. The last family we had one for, a lot of people did not understand it. I had one little old lady.

[01:00:00] She said, "I ain't never seen food at a funeral before!" And I said, "Well, ma'am, has your family ever gotten together for any event—holiday, birthday—that there wasn't food involved?" "Well, no. But I ain't never seen food at a funeral before." (Laughs) But instead of having a reception line, people are standing around with lemonade and a plate of finger food in their hand, and they're socializing. Instead of having 15 seconds to a minute to stand in a line to say, "I'm sorry about your dad, you're in our prayers," whatever, and moving on to the next person, they're able to take time, and the guests at the visitation are not speaking to people they've never seen before, never heard of before that they're not comfortable speaking with. They can go to the people they know, talk to them, and go on about their business. And I think it's a more comfortable, relaxed situation. But it's new, and a lot of people are—they're starting to see it. Last time we did it, the family said, "I can't imagine why anybody would have a funeral anymore without having a reception." Said it just made all the difference in the world, because they were used to the traditional line-up of people going by speaking to all the family. And it's a lot of trouble for us, but it does—we just, Sunday we had our 25th memorial service. For 25 years, usually the second Sunday in

December, we send out invitations to all the families we've served inviting them here to a memorial service, have a speaker, light candles, read a poem, whatever. We probably had 450 people here Sunday for it. We had to show it on closed-circuit to people in this room. In the chapel we can seat—well, with the folding chairs we put in there we can seat 375 people in there. We had people in there, people in the foyer. We have an ornament—

[Break in recording]

SB: How have the changes in Burlington and Alamance County over the years been reflected in your work? For instance, you mentioned the mills closing. Has that made an impact on what you do?

JL: Ah, yeah. Burlington was a textile town. The textile industry in Burlington controlled the city council, county commissioners. They kept Burlington from growing. It hurt Burlington. They did not want industry coming in, paying decent wages. They had, they were thinking they wanted it that way. And it worked for years and years. When industry started moving overseas, Mexico, China, whatever, it's amazing what's happened to this immediate area here, with industry. And, gosh, if we had, in the '60s, '70s, we had a family from New Jersey—well, I think when I went to high school there were Catholic families in Burlington, and now they have a huge Catholic church. I'm going to say it would seat 1,000 people. Of course they have the Hispanic services, and traditional Catholic services. Probably four different priests. The influx of more trained, high-tech personnel, our community college here has grown. They have taught a lot of people more high-tech business training than we had before. We love the Yankees. I mean, it's like, they're used to pay-as-you-go.

[01:05:00] I always say, if we've got a family coming from New Jersey, they've got the checkbook, the checkbook's in the shirt pocket, because that's what they're used to having to do. We're used to waiting 30 days for the insurance to pay, or set up the estate. It's just a difference. [Chatting about childhood friend and a trip to play football.]

SB: What do you wish that people understood better about your work?

JL: Ah. The value in it. I'm in it all my life and I realize the value of it. Certain things, certain times, I look back and I say, "This makes me want to stay here." And I'm proud of what we do. But I think a lot of people are—(sighs) and I think it's because families are not as tight anymore. And it's a terrible thing to say, but I think the recession, in the '30s or early '30s, whenever the Great Depression was, I will guarantee you that people were closer, families were closer, more people attended church. They needed something. Today, everybody's got a job—everybody that wants a job has got a job—they've got a little bit of money, a nice house, they don't need anything. They may want some stuff, but they've got more than just the necessities. Another depression would

change the attitude of the people. I can't say as I want a depression to happen, but when times are hard you grab onto whatever you can grab on to. Makes things a little bit better. You've got to believe in something. But I guarantee that churches would—the offering may note what they would like to have, but the attendance would grow, because you need the support of, need some hope for the future. Sometimes, with some families, you just—you don't feel like they see any value in what you're doing. In and out, let's get it over with, get back to work, whatever. When I get through with a family, if I've never seen them before, don't know anything about them, I want to feel like I know them and they know me, and I want them to know that I've done something to help them through this. And if you don't get that, it's not near as much fun, and you're not getting what I like to get out of funeral service. And it's changing, with cremation. It's changing a lot. We are finally beginning to convince people, "Okay, you want cremation. That's just the end result of it." But services—a traditional service of some sort, I think, is helpful.

[00:10:00] The visitation is even more important, because you get to get the support of family and friends, and you get to tell your story. The service is good too, but the visitation, to me, is more important. But convincing them that they need that— I can't think of the psychologist's name right now, but he wrote several books on funeral service. He's Jewish. But his little slogan was, "Sorrow shared is sorrow diminished." And you need to hear those things. Mother and Dad's friends, and your friends. Whatever. You need to know people care. And if you don't do anything, you don't have any type of service, you leave them out, they don't know what to do. Your close friends may come to the house, may bring you some food or whatever, but in general, "What do we do? I knew him, I cared about him," whatever, "but you're not giving me the opportunity to let you know that I cared about him."

SB: What do you see for the future, both of funerals and of funeral service?

JL: Whew. Almost scared. We have to have this—you haven't seen all our building, but we have a nice building. It's furnished nice, got a good staff. I think cremation will top out, I don't think we'll go to 80 percent cremation like some foreign countries have done. But we've got to, people have got to learn, that they need some of our services. Whether you cremate it at the end, or whether you bury it, whatever; but there are some other things that you do. And we have to adapt to it. But funeral directors are not the best promoters of what they do, always. We're learning how to, but we're—as Grandma would say, "We're sot[2] in our ways." I like to think I'm progressive, but maybe I'm not. Maybe just in my mind I'm progressive. I like to think I'm different. We were at a conference in Arizona, and a funeral director out there was doing a bulletin for his funerals with a picture on it. "Oh, that's cool." We came back, we started doing it. Well,

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[2] An old-fashioned, largely rural form of "set" or "sat."

like six months later all the competitors were doing the same thing. So we went to color. Six months later, everybody's doing color bulletins.

[Chatting about history of and relationship with Mastercraft Casket Company, of which Jim Lowe is a former co-owner; discussing his former Mastercraft partner Bill Simpson's funeral museum in Chatham, Virginia. Discussion of politics and Mr. Lowe's hopes for the future of the Trump presidency.]

JL: [Lawrence Edwards?] worked for us 41 years. We had a visitation one night for a lady. The next day we had to carry her to New Bern, North Carolina, for burial. So Lawrence and I went into the visitation room, closed the casket, we load it in the hearse, drive straight to New Bern. Pull up in front of the church. We're two hours, two hours and a half before the service. I said "Lawrence, there's no steps in the church so let's just carry the casket on in. The two of us can do that, roll it in, set it up. We'll be ready when the first people get here." So we took her out of the hearse, put her on the church truck, roll her in, open the casket—she wasn't in it. Lawrence is sitting there holding the casket spray, shaking, the petals are falling off. I'm thinking, "We loaded her. She was in it. We didn't stop. What happened?" Or, "If she's still in Burlington, can they get here in time for a funeral at 3:00?" Then, all of a sudden, the little skirt that hangs down, I saw a few little gray hairs; and it hit me—she had been a double-amputee, and she had slid down in the foot of the casket. We hit our brakes or something and she slid down. It's like, all the things that go through your mind in two, three seconds, it's amazing. Slid her up, fixed her hair, put her back on the pillow! I will never forget that. It's like, I'm surprised I didn't fall over dead! I really am. (Laughing) That was very interesting, though. I've got to remember that story.

[End of recording]